Saskatchewan Labour
Status of Women Office

A SNAPSHOT IN TIME...

SASKATCHEWAN WOMEN DURING WORLD WAR II

This is a snapshot of life's realities for Saskatchewan women, their children and families during wartime. Information has been gleaned from a variety of sources in order to present insights that touch on their diverse experiences. It was during these years that we see some of our greatest societal changes, as women entered the workforce to replace the men who were in service, joined the military and did important volunteer work.

MILITARY LIFE

WOMEN ENLIST

World War II was not the first time Canadian women served their country. From as early as 1885, women served in military actions, but only as nursing sisters. It was during WWII that women took on other roles that were traditionally filled by men so that the soldiers were free for more "important duties". Women enlisted in the Canadian Women's Army Corps, the Royal Canadian Air Force Women's Division and the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service.

A new RCAF recruit is sworn in, Saskatoon, 1942

"THIS IS OUR BATTLE TOO!"

Maclean's Magazine Ad
June 1, 1944

When war was declared, Canada's professional soldiery numbered 4,500, air force personnel 3,100 and navy 1,800. Over the course of the war, one million Canadians and Newfoundlanders served their country. By the end of the war, 45,000 had died and 55,000 were wounded. Saskatchewan saw 3,700 of these casualties.

Women in Army Corps

WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

October is Women's History Month. The Government of Canada designated this month in 1992 in response to the 1929 "Persons Case" when women in Canada were legally declared persons and could sit in the Senate.

Women's History Month is an opportunity to learn more about women's roles and contributions to the development of Canada and Canadian society.

In 2005, Status of Women Canada's theme is "Women and War: Contributions and Consequences", in honour of the 60th Anniversary of V-E and V-J Day, and the end of World War II. As part of this commemoration, the Government of Canada has declared 2005 the *Year of the Veteran*.

ABORIGINIAL PARTICIPATION

During World War II, 72 Status Indian women volunteered in the war effort, but the largest component of Aboriginal participants was Métis.

Dorothy Askwith

A recognized Saskatchewan Métis veteran is Dorothy Askwith. She became a member of the Royal Canadian Air Force at the age of 17. She was motivated by the steady income of $1.25 per day, clothing, and free medical services. The Armed Forces was a lucrative opportunity because times were tough after the Depression and it beat making 25¢ a day doing casual labour.

TRAINING FOR MILITARY DUTY

Before the Canadian Armed Forces was experiencing a shortage of male volunteers, women were encouraged to trade in their housedresses for brown ties and badges of Athene, the goddess of war and wisdom.

CWAC lapel pin

CWAC Uniform

Women were quick to sign up for duty at the Bombing and Gunnery School at Mossbank, about 50 miles south of Moose Jaw. The airwomen filled jobs such as dental and hospital assistants, equipment assistants, drivers, parachute riggers, magazine loaders, clerks, messwomen, and cooks, relieving men for air crew duties.

Not just anyone could apply for military duty. Eligible candidates were women between 20 and 35 years of age. Preference was for unmarried women, who were about 125 pounds and five feet two inches tall. Uniform fittings were not usually a problem since the airwomen had "fairly regulation figures". The women took these requirements seriously according to the Regina Leader-Post: "Of the first group who presented themselves for enlistment, a baker's dozen were rejected because they were either above or below weight standards. Disappointed, they went back home determined to **diet** for their country."

BARRACKS LIFE

Saskatchewan Army women lived in top-notch accommodations in barracks built especially for them. Barracks were constructed in Regina, Prince Albert, Maple Creek and Dundurn, and were compared to "living in a fashionable university residence". They featured plenty of hot water and natural light and proper air circulation. Women slept three to a cubicle, with spacious cupboards and clothing racks. There were common rooms for luggage, extra cupboards, showers, washrooms and baths. Women dined in a sectioned-off area of the men's mess hall.

"These new barracks, authorities say, will help to explain why more and more young ladies are giving up home comforts and good civilian jobs to don the King's uniform."
Leader Post – August 5, 1942

WAR HEROINE

Saskatchewan war heroine Joan Bamford Fletcher joined the British Fannies in 1941. The Fannies was a large organization of adventurous women who worked on the front lines rescuing injured soldiers and providing nursing care. They were highly skilled in driving and repairing a variety of motor vehicles. At the end of the war, Joan was sent to Sumatra to rescue Dutch civilians after their three-year internment by the Japanese.

Joan Bamford Fletcher

"Rescue from Sumatra" is the inspiring documentary about a woman from Regina who made headlines around the world.

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CIVILIAN LIFE

RATIONING

The size of the economy doubled between 1939 and 1945. Demand for goods from farms and factories increased. The government created the Wartime Prices and Trade Board to head the allocation of resources, to control production and to freeze prices. This government control included rationing of goods.

The ration list included: sugar, coffee, tea, butter, meat, liquor, gasoline and car tires. People tried to make due with the strict measures. Families salvaged scrap metal and rubber, made their own clothing, and tended to their own vegetable gardens. As well, new recipes were created that called for lesser amounts of rationed ingredients.

For the most part, rationing was taken 'without a whimper' although hoarding and black markets existed. Attempts to get 'under the wire' of the rationing orders also occurred in Regina.

"There are a good many Regina housewives who hoped they could get in under the wire Monday or else completely misunderstood the new coffee and tea regulations. In one large grocery store, [a] girl checker had long since given up explaining, "No, madam, you can't have both," or "No. madam, you can't have that much tea." By the time 5 o'clock came, she was just lifting each package of tea and coffee out of the shoppers' baskets and tossing them into the huge pile which had accumulated at the side of the counter."

Regina Leader Post – August 5, 1942

COMMUNITY SERVICE ...
"The Touchstone of Human Greatness"

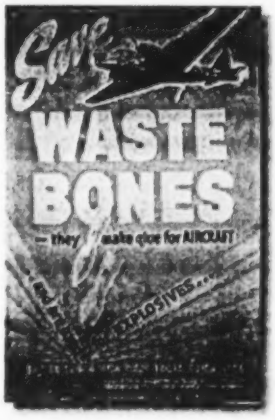
Many service clubs were organized during the war years to support men overseas and home communities throughout the province. The following is just a taste of the true spirit of volunteerism in Saskatchewan.

In 1941, the Women's Voluntary Services Division of the Department of National War Services was established. Under their umbrella, the Women's Voluntary Services Regina Centre initiated home nursing training sessions and organized the making of hospital dressings and bandages.

Through a block captain system, women were encouraged to do their part for the war effort within their own homes. The Centre grew, taking on other projects like the collection of salvage, fundraising, and clothing collections.

Volunteers also assisted in the re-establishment of veterans in society by providing hospitality services for wives from overseas, conducting housing surveys and placements, and services and comforts to patients in veterans' hospitals. The group was also instrumental in identifying the need for post-war recreation projects for youth and adults and in bringing service clubs together to raise funds for community initiatives such as swimming pools and recreation facilities

A Call for Salvaging...



LADIES' AUXILIARY 120 BOMBER SQUADRON OF THE ROYAL CANADIAN AIR FORCE

The Ladies Auxiliary was established in 1940, providing parcels of cigarettes, knitted goods, candy and toilet articles to Regina airmen overseas. At a 1941 meeting, the following carefully chosen words of encouragement were recorded by the then President K.S. Holmes:

"We are starting another year. We, with the boys, hope it will be one of victory. Let us hope and pray that it may be so. <u>But</u>, nothing must interfere with our work. We must keep right on to the end of the road. ..... <u>We</u> must do our little bit out here as long as it is necessary. The boys are still fighting and we must stand behind them. Some of our boys have come home and more are on the way. We rejoice with the mothers, wives, sisters, and sweethearts, who are so blessed to welcome their dear ones. With the parents of the boys who have gone to their Eternal home we mourn. We know that only God can give them comfort. We would like them to know we think of them and admire the brave way they carry on. Then to the mothers and relatives of our Prisoner of War boys we extend our sympathy and hope in the future we will be able to be of greater service to these brave lads. Thinking of the suffering caused by the ravages of this war, let us all fervently pray – Give Peace in our time Oh Lord." ~ K. S. Holmes

Woman in the RCAF

RURAL WOMEN

With many of the men off to war, women had to take over new responsibilities on the farm. This was in addition to looking after their family and household. Everybody was expected to contribute.

"As the result of a recent conference between the Labour Bureau of the Department of Agriculture and representative women from city and farm, it was decided to initiate a campaign among urban women to meet and relieve the crying need for help in farm homes during the rush seasons of harvest and threshing.

Undoubtedly the women from urban centres will respond to this as a patriotic call to national service, and will willingly render such assistance as lies in their power.

However, it is the duty of the farm women to meet this response in a like patriotic spirit, remembering that the help offered will be according to the ability to serve and not according to the accepted standards of domestic help on the farm. That is, the work will require to be *home* tasks such as they are accustomed to and not milking or other outdoor labour to which the majority are entirely unaccustomed.

We beg your forbearance and sisterly thoughtfulness in a mutual attempt to serve our nation in a time of stress. Signed on behalf of the WGGA (Women's Grain Growers' Association)."

~Letter from Violet McNaughton, 1942

ALL THE WORK

It was quite hard for us.
Because the women
Had to do all the work
And things like that.

So we even stooked.
I was old enough.
I was only I guess thirteen –
Fourteen at that time –

And I was helping Mom
Stook for the farmers.
Because they didn't have no men
To do anything like that.

~ Rose Fleury

Prior to the war, women were encouraged to be homemakers, taking charge of the home and family. Most women who sought jobs were single and usually found work as domestic workers, teachers or in retail sales.

The turning point for women came during World War II when they entered the workforce in record numbers to replace men who were away at war. Even though women were expected to quit their jobs when the men returned from service – and many did – there were also many women determined to keep working.

This experience demonstrated that with opportunity and encouragement women could succeed. And as a result, it served to strengthen women's resolve for fairness and equality.

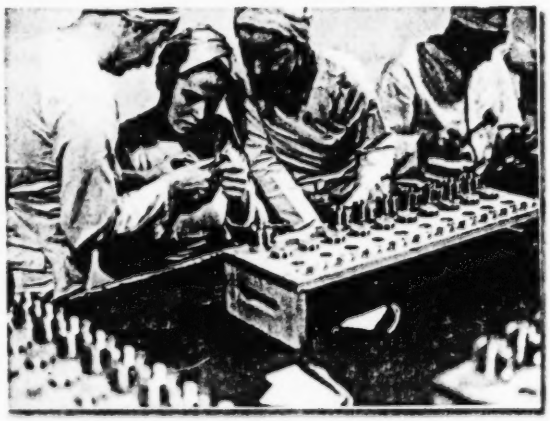
"Almost overnight, women were holding priority jobs in business and industry. Married women experienced satisfactions on the job which they had not found within the home; older women received recognition, often for the first time, of their skills; teenaged girls drew salaries as large or larger than their mothers. Women as volunteers made a remarkable contribution to the total war effort, without losing sight of their responsibility to their immediate community."

~ Building Fellowship: A History of the YWCA in Saskatchewan 1905-1955

In 1942, women were also invited to move to Ontario and Quebec to take jobs in industry. Intensive training and recruiting took place. Emergency training schools for women were set up in Regina, Moose Jaw, Saskatoon and Prince Albert. Women were trained in the use of precision instruments and as machine operators. Women between the ages of 18 and 35 and in good health were wanted to work in eastern war plants. "Keep 'em firing" was the motto used.

"The kind of girl we want ... is the girl with a good head on her shoulders. We take girls absolutely unskilled in war industries and train them right at the plant. A Saskatchewan girl – whether she's [sic] farmer's daughter, domestic servant, waitress, clerk, stenographer, college graduate or debutante – if she is willing to learn – has the qualities of a good war worker....The scale of wages to be paid to the women workers in the plant is 35 cents per hour for a 48-hour week, as a starting wage, plus cost-of-living bonus of $2.85 per week."

~ Regina Leader-Post, October 5, 1942



Women working at the General Engineering Company (Canada) in munitions factory, 1943

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"Price Control in Canada"

At the end of 1941, The Wartime Prices and Trade Board in Ottawa instituted price control of 'civilian' goods to achieve "the maximum production of war supplies". Women were encouraged to list all food and clothes items they regularly purchased, along with the names of the stores where they were purchased. They were also to record the highest price they had been charged for the goods.

This Board believed this process was important in keeping the women from becoming "careless about prices", and stop accusations that stores were taking advantage by charging too much for goods. Because women attended to 80% of the country's total retail buying, it was important for Canadian women to be "guardians of the law".

An appeal was made to all women:

> **"This is your job—this is the great task you can now perform. This is the work that, of all people, you, the women of Canada, can do most thoroughly."**
>
> **~ Price Control in Canada - 1941 – Wartime Prices and Trade Board**

War Bonds

During World War II, the government needed to raise money to help fund the war effort so they implemented Victory War Bonds. Anyone could buy War Bonds because bonds were basically a loan from the purchaser to the government. The government utilized the proceeds of these bonds to help fight the war. After the war ended, anyone who had bought a Victory War Bond could cash them in. The government would then return the money they had paid for the bonds, plus interest. Victory War Bonds were also referred to as War Savings Certificates. Between 1940 and 1945, the Royal Bank of Canada participated in the sale of over $12 billion worth of Canadian Government War Loans and Victory Loan Bonds. A campaign was launched to persuade women to purchase Victory War Bonds. This was primarily because women were now in charge of household budgets. A few examples of the Victory War Bond posters are below:

War Bond Drive in Regina, 1942

Retail Sales

War or not, people still needed clothes and household goods. Simpson's, Eatons and Army and Navy were the big department stores complete with catalogue shopping. Catalogue shopping extended the reach of the department stores into the rural heart of the prairies. Simpson's and Eatons sold higher-end goods while Army and Navy took a more low-end retailing approach – focusing on distress merchandising – bankruptcies, cash purchases and discounted goods.

1945-46 Army and Navy Catalogue

A Simpson's ad in the *Regina Leader-Post* showed beautiful straw hats, a must have at the time, at $2.98 to $5.95. Tailored blouses and woolen skirts cost $2.98 and fresh, crisp housedresses were $1.98. Undergarments such as durable cotton bloomers were priced at 79¢ and satin slips at $1.69. A decent pair of shoes cost $2 and their special sale was evening gowns at $1.49.

Silk and nylon were in short supply, so as a war measure, women used a new product called Velva Leg Film to make it look like they were wearing stockings. The leg makeup offered the benefit of no hosiery runs or having to rinse them out every evening, but women did have to be careful not to get their legs wet. Situations such as crossing your legs could present some difficulties should a woman perspire!

Velva Leg Film ad

Women and Politics

During WWII, social justice was in demand because Canadian people wanted to avoid the hard conditions of the 1930s. In 1944, nine days after D-day, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation party in Saskatchewan became the first social democratic government in North America. This victory was thanks to the socialist movement during WWII and would be the foundation of social security, better housing, Medicare, and family allowance in Canada. These social programs would be most beneficial to women and their families.

Louise Lucas

Two Saskatchewan women were active in politics during the 1940 Federal Election. One was Louise Lucas, a farmwife from near Assiniboia. Ms. Lucas was an advocate for women's rights and encouraged prairie women to join in the movement. She was active with the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (now the NDP) party and because of her involvement with the CCF, she is often referred to as "the Mother of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation". She ran in the March 26, 1940 federal election in the Melville Riding. Although she was defeated in this election, she was given much credit for her work in helping her party to achieve its 1944 victory in Saskatchewan.

Another woman was Dorise Winifred Nielsen, a homemaker and a teacher, became Saskatchewan's first woman MP on March 26, 1940. Ms. Nielsen was a member of the Unity Party in the North Battleford riding. According to *Herstory 1974*, Ms. Nielsen "knew first hand the sufferings of farming families in the depression." Her goal in parliament was to represent the poor.

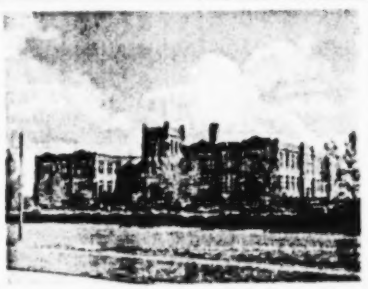
Dorise Nielsen campaign poster

"I fail to see what logic is behind the position where women receive only two-thirds of the basic pay that men receive, when the women do the same job. I believe it is a hang-over, a relic of the past, of the dark ages, which is hung on to us, relegating women to a position of inferiority. When we women have discarded the old Victorian red flannel petticoats to do the job, it is time the men discarded the red flannel petticoats around their minds and gave us equality."

(Dorise Nielsen, M.P., House of Commons, May, 25, 1943. Back the Attack, Jean Bruce, ed.)

DID YOU KNOW?

- After WWII there was a veterans' wing in the Regina General Hospital, a military hospital and a convalescent home in Regina. Government House was used as the convalescent home.
- A post-World War II (1944) survey of wages for employed girls revealed salaries of $6 to $20 a month for clerks in stores and $60 to $100 a month for stenographers.
- Today women represent 11% of Regular Forces in Canada.
- Today all occupations within the Regular Forces in Canada are open to women except that of a Roman Catholic Chaplain.
- The total population of Saskatchewan in 1941 was 895,992 – 418,429 females and 477,563 males.
- The farm population in Saskatchewan in 1941 was 57.4 per cent.
- Teachers attending Normal School (now the Sound Stage Production Centre in Regina) were moved to Lakeview School during the war when the RCAF occupied their building.
- During the war, teachers were in short supply in rural areas. Top students who had completed Normal School were recruited to teach in one-room schoolhouses.



Normal School
City of Regina Archives Photograph Collection

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- The turning point for women came during World War II. What were some of the major changes experienced by women and why are they important?
- In 1940, out of the nine women who ran during the federal election, two were from Saskatchewan. Who were these women and what party did they represent?
- What were the standards set for women wanting to join the military?
- What was the government agency that controlled production and resources?
- What role were civilian women expected to play during the war years?
- What three Saskatchewan department stores had catalogue shopping?
- What were the benefits of women joining the military?

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